

Centenarian Dentist Reflects on Career in Navy

U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

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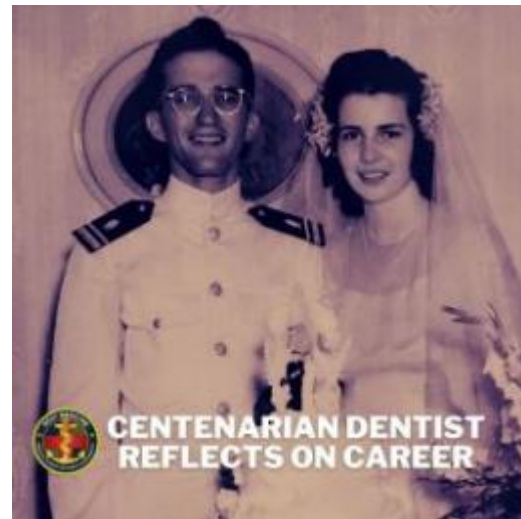
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On August 28, 2021, Dr. Albert Donald Rohrer celebrated his 100th birthday from his home in Louisville, Ky. While surrounded by his family and friends, he reflected on some of his proudest legacies in his long life—his caring family, his 60 years as a practicing dentist, his active role with the Shriners, Masons and Scottish Rite, and his time in the Navy Dental Corps.

Remarkably when Dr. Rohrer was born the Navy Dental Corps was less than ten years old. The Naval Postgraduate Dental School did not yet exist. The selection of the Navy's first dental flag officer was still 20 years away. All Navy dentists were still referred to as "dental surgeons." And the dental specialties of oral surgery, endodontics, and periodontics were all in their infancies.



Admittedly, the Navy may not have been on Dr. Rohrer's radar in those early years growing up in Beckley, West Virginia, but dentistry always was. Dentistry offered a way of serving his local community and, as he put it, "relieving the suffering of humanity."

While a young man, Rohrer was taken under the tutelage of local dentist Dr. John Calloway who helped instill in him a passion for "excellence in dentistry." And perhaps there was something about Beckley too that proved pivotal and motivated some of its citizens to become dedicated dental professionals. Beckley is also the hometown of Rear Adm. (ret.) Stephen Pachuta, a former Navy Dental Corps Chief and later Dean of West Virginia University's School of Dentistry.

Along the way the Navy came calling. Rohrer registered for the draft in February 1942 while still an undergraduate. But it was only after graduating dental school at the University of Louisville that Rohrer was called into service. He was commissioned Lieutenant (junior grade) in the Navy Reserves on June 26, 1945.

The mission of a Navy Dental Corps officer has not changed in the 76 years since Rohrer first entered the service. Then as now Navy dentists help ensure our sailors and Marines have optimal dental health and are prepared for deploying.

In 1945, Rohrer was briefly assigned to the Navy Yard in Charleston, S.C., to provide dental care to sailors attached to the station. His first impressions of the Navy were positive and proved impactful on his later career in civilian dentistry. "I liked the Navy and Dental Corps," said Rohrer. "I gained a lot of experience and learned to be fast and proficient as a dentist."

At the end of the war, Rohrer was assigned to a forensic unit on Pearl Harbor to help identify the remains of hundreds of Marines killed in the Battle of Tarawa.

The Tarawa Atoll is the chief port of entry into the Gilbert Islands chain, located 2,300 southwest of Hawaii. Tarawa is composed of 25 islets, chief among them is Betio which served as the primary landing spot for over 5,000 Marines on November 20, 1943. Over a 76-hour period, over 1,000 Americans (including 990 Marines and 30 Sailors) were killed in the fight against a heavily entrenched enemy on Betio. Many of the dead were buried in

makeshift cemeteries and never identified. Remarkably, in 2021—78 years since the battle was fought—more than 400 of these servicemembers remain “lost.”

In 1946, the U.S. Army Quartermaster’s 604th Graves Registration Company began excavating some of Betio’s cemeteries and sent the remains to the Central Identification Laboratory (CIL) at Schofield Mausoleum in Hawaii for identification and repatriation. Rohrer was part of the military’s forensic team and spent many painstaking hours analyzing human remains that could not be identified through either finger print or facial recognition. For Rohrer the chance to identify the lost servicemen was meaningful, but also foundational. He credits this experience for allowing him to serve as the Deputy Coroner for Jefferson County, Kentucky in his later years.

After three years in service Rohrer returned to stateside and left active duty. During the Korean War he return to duty and served at the Naval Station Norfolk until 1953. He remained in the Navy Reserves until 1969 when he retired as a Lieutenant Commander.

Throughout his life though, the Navy—and service to others—remained Dr. Rohrer’s guiding light. This remains evident to his family today, among them his grandson Oliver Olson, a former Army “MP”-turned nurse practitioner. Olson has gotten to know his grandfather quite well while serving as one of his caretakers these past few years. And he has learned that his grandfather’s service in the Navy has always been a point of pride.

“He loved the opportunity to serve and have sailors and Marines as patients,” said Olson. “They were always polite and respectful—and he was always particularly impressed with the Marines.”